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The Search for 1562 French Charlesfort—Negative Result

By Stanley South

In 1981, the Greater Piedmont Chapter of the Explorer's Club of New York became interested in my archaeological research at Santa Elena and asked how the membership could help. I wrote a proposal and received funding, to search for evidence of Ribault's 1562 French Charlesfort (South 1982).

Through studying the documents of this French establishment four years prior to the arrival of Spaniards at Santa Elena, I thought the site might be found on the high ground adjacent to the deep water of Beaufort River, on the grounds of the U. S. Naval Hospital at Port Royal, half-way between Parris Island and Beaufort. Our 1981 three-foot-square sampling project there produced negative results.

I then explored a deep water and high ground site on Pigeon Point, north of Beaufort, but that also failed to reveal any sign of 16th century occupation. We then surface surveyed north of the hospital to Spanish Point, but again failed to find 16th century artifacts. I concluded that the most likely site for Charlesfort was at Port Royal (South 1982:10). The search story did not end here.

French Charlesfort

Chester DePratter joined my research effort in 1989, when he urged another effort to try to find French Charlesfort. We received grants from the *National Geographic Magazine*, the USC Research and Productive Scholarship Committee, and from SCIAA through Bruce Rippeteau. With Tommy Charles and Nena Powell Rice, we undertook the excavation of a mile-long trench on the next point up-stream from Santa

Elena to again search for that elusive fort. Finally, after having been so impressed with Chester's work many years before when he had presented an important paper at SEAC, we were finally in the field together.

We noticed that a watercolor by Le Moyne, engraved by DeBry, shows Charlesfort being built on an island that appeared to us to represent the southern tip of Parris Island. It also shows the little island in the Beaufort River, mentioned above, still to be seen, on modern maps (DePratter and South 1990). To search this shoreline area we used a backhoe to cut the long exploratory trench, but found no evidence of Charlesfort or occupation by Spaniards or Frenchmen.

The Underwater Search for the French Vessel *Le Prince* [*El Principe*]

At more than one point in our survey, we thought we had found Charlesfort, but as we cut slot trenches and mapped disturbances we found, we finally had to admit that we had not found the fort site (DePratter and South 1990:74-106). In conjunction with our search for Charlesfort on land, Bruce F. Thompson, Conservator for SCIAA, with the assistance of Judy Wood from the Savannah District Corps of Engineers, along with volunteers, conducted an underwater survey of Means Creek searching for the French vessel, *Le Prince* (*El Principe*), wrecked near Santa Elena, and reported by Pedro Menendez Marques to the King on October 21, 1577 (Thompson 1990:68). The wreck was not found, but at this writing, 2004, the search goes on through the efforts of Chester DePratter and

SCIAA Underwater Archaeologist Jim Spirek.

The after-hours time on this project was enjoyable for all of us as we sat on the porch of Plums Restaurant in Beaufort and talked about the dig. A SC ETV crew from Rock Hill documented the Charlesfort search, in spite of the fact that digging a mile-long backhoe trench through the woods is not the most exciting footage to shoot. However, some dramatic shots of Chester shoveling in the narrow trench were achieved by using what we in photography school called the low-angle view from "the cockroach perspective." This perspective is used when the photographer must resort to shooting from that angle to put some interest in the composition.

Some of us often visited the still-standing John Cross Tavern, a two-story 18th century, tabby restaurant and bar in Beaufort, to be royally fed and entertained by owner Harry Chakides, Jr., who, when he designed the bar, left a window to show the tabby construction.

French Ceramics Discovered by Jim Legg Via D-Day in Normandy

When the mile-long trench produced no evidence for French occupation, Chester asked if perhaps the "the pre-fort moat-like ditch" I had found beneath the Spanish casa fuerte (fortified house) structure in Fort San Felipe (at Santa Elena) might have been dug by Jean Ribault's men as part of Charlesfort. When he asked me about that idea, I said, "when he could show me 16th-century French ceramics from the Fort San Felipe artifact collection, I might believe that theory." He went through the

Spanish ceramics I had recovered from Fort San Felipe, and besides some suspicious pink paste tin-ash glazed ware, no unusual fragments popped out from the 1982 dig as being smoking sherds from a French connection.

Later, in 1996, Chester hired Jim Legg to re-analyze the artifacts from Santa Elena. Jim was looking through the 19th-century plantation collection on the Santa Elena site, with the expectation that French sherds would be included if Charlesfort were there. Jim recognized the brown stoneware sherds characteristic of those made in Normandy. He then found other French types that had not been recognized in the 1982 ceramic analysis (DePratter and South 1997, 2(1):4-5, 1997b, 2(2):8-9). These stoneware sherds, he realized, were like those he had found on the battlefields of Normandy when he visited there with his dad, who had landed in a glider there during the invasion of Normandy on D-Day.

In his visits to museums in France, Jim had noticed that the French had been making stoneware in the 16th century, and that the tourist ware made in Normandy today looks much the same as the archaeological fragments he was seeing from Fort San Felipe. To prove his point he showed us, for comparison, a brown Normandy stoneware vessel he had bought while in France. He had visited le Chateau du Louvre Museum where he saw examples of 16th-century French stonewares and earthenwares (Fleury and Druta 1990). Jim was

thereby able to identify stoneware sherds from Normandy, Beauvais, Martincamp, and earthenware sherds from Saintonge, as well as other French types in the collection excavated in Spanish Fort San Felipe (Décarle-Audet 1979; Niellon and Moussette 1981). French Charlesfort had been found beneath Spanish Fort San Felipe!



Chester DePratter and Stan South setting reference points for excavating at French Charlesfort. (SCIAA photo by Jim Legg)

A Rattlesnake Den

As our crew followed an animal trail along the high ground adjacent to the Means Creek marsh one January day, we found a group of rattlesnakes, in and beside the trail, sunning and waiting for game. As I walked at the front of the group, I smelled an odor I had learned was characteristic of snakes, and I stopped. Looking around for the source of the odor, it was then I saw, about 30 feet away, a rattlesnake coiled up in the path watching me. I looked around in front of me on both sides of the animal trail we were following and saw two more canebrake rattlers, sunning. I called to Chester and the

crew gathered behind me some distance and watched as the snakes slowly began to move toward the edge of the nearby riverbank.

When they were out of the path, I began walking on. Chester suddenly called out for me to stop and back up, which I did, puzzled as to why I needed to do that. "Don't ask questions," he yelled, "Just do it!" He then pointed to an extended

rattlesnake, about eight feet long, lying at a right angle to the path, with its head a foot or so from where I had stopped. That was the largest rattlesnake I had ever seen in the wild. What I could see of it was at least seven or eight feet long and larger around than my upper arm. I yelled back to Chester and the others with us to look at me and compare my length with that of this monster rattler and to compare my

upper arm with the diameter of the snake. They agreed that the snake won that measurement contest. It was still stretched straight out, making it possible for us get a good look at its size from fairly close up.

We looked carefully over the area for more snakes, but four in the same place were enough for one day. We went down the bank to examine the place where the snakes had gone, and found a hole extending back into the bank beside the marsh, where the snakes had made their den, with their favorite sunning spot being on the high bank above, beside the game trail.

They apparently had a good

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CHARLESFORT, From Page 15

environmental niche going on there. We reported the discovery of the snake "den" to the environmental officer and volunteered to show him the location, but when we arrived to show him and others the site, he chose to wait on the nearby airstrip as a safer place, while we took others to the den. Later a Marine SP showed up wearing a sidearm, saying he had been assigned to shoot to kill if he saw the snakes again. I don't know if they dared venture out again against the U. S. Marines.

The discovery of that snake den reminded me of a story about the time, years before, when I was working in North Carolina at Brunswick Town State Historic Site and saw a copperhead snake in the road. I couldn't resist telling the Charlesfort crew that other snake story.

"Blow His Head Off, Boss!"—Knowing When to Stop

One day as we were on the road leaving Brunswick Town, with me driving the pickup with Charlie Smith beside me, and the crew in the bed, the truck passed over a copperhead snake in the road. I stopped, and saw that I hadn't hit it. It was coiled ready to strike. I called to Freddy and told him to get the bush axe out of the bed of the truck and kill it. Instead, he handed me a 32-caliber pistol and said, "Blow his head off, boss!" I told him I couldn't hit the side of a barn with a pistol, but he insisted, egged on by the crew, waiting to see how badly I missed.

So, I took the pistol in hand, commenting that I would probably empty the chamber and still wouldn't have hit the thing. But, like I had seen in the movies, I took aim below the head from about 15 feet away, and slowly brought it up until

I squeezed the trigger as the head came in alignment with the sights. To my surprise the head disappeared from the snake, amid cries of astonishment and disbelief from the crew.

Later on, when we would see a snake, or when one of the crew was telling the story about the boss man being a crack shot with a pistol, they would urge me to demonstrate my "skill." I told them it had been a lucky shot, but they never believed me. I never tried to use Freddy's pistol again, sometimes success comes from knowing when to stop while you're ahead.

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STAN SOUTH'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY TO BE PUBLISHED

Stan South has completed his autobiography, *An Archaeological Evolution*, to be published by Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers of New York. That is the same company that published his recent books, *Pioneers in Historical Archaeology: Breaking New Ground*, *Historical Archaeology in Wachovia*, and *Archaeological Pathways to Historic Site Development*. He is currently working on what he hopes will be the final edit of the over 400-page book. In it he tells over 500 stories, illustrated by 141 photographs of his life. These include his visit to an uncle in a log cabin "soddy," who was homesteading in Montana in 1934, to his recent dig with Chester DePratter and Jim Legg at the Stone Rock Mound, where a brown beer bottle was the only artifact found.

One of the stories tells of searching for clues of Frenchmen on Parris Island at 1562 Charlesfort, the underwater search for the French vessel *El Principe*, and the final discovery of the fort through the efforts of Chester DePratter and Jim Legg. He also tells the story of the snake den they walked into during the Charlesfort search in the preceding excerpts from *An Archaeological Evolution*, to appear early in 2005.